DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 531 CG 016 027

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TITLE Some Thoughts on the Widow(er)'s Persistent Tie with the Deceased Spouse.
PUB DATE Nov 8?
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Scientific Gerontological Society (34th) and the Scientific & Educational Canadian Association on Gerontology (10th), (Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 8-12, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; Death; *Emotional Adjustment; Family Structure; Gerontology; *Grief; Interpersonal Relationship; *Memory; *Older Adults; *Psychological Patterns; *Widowed
IDENTIFIERS *Marital Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that older persons who have become widowed after many years of marriage maintain deep attachments to their deceased spouses. Case histories, observations and interviews were used to explore some aspects of the persistence of the marital tie after the first few years of mourning had passed. The major element in this tie was memory, which was often selective and sometimes distorted. Grief tended to persist in the form of denial, anger, and yearning. Social values and family feelings also tended to perpetuate the marital bond. The home shared by the couple was often the place which most strongly tied the widow(er) with the deceased. These ties tended to be positive and supportive and provided a nourishing link with the past. The findings suggest that such ties may enhance rather than interfere with the ability to establish new relationships; with a supportive network of family and friends, little or no professional help may be needed. (JAC)

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WIDOW(ER)'S PERSISTENT TIE WITH THE DECEASED SPOUSE

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WIDOW(ER)'S PERSISTENT TIE WITH THE DECEASED SPOUSE[1]

Sidney Z. Moss and Miriam S. Moss[2]

Old persons who have become widowed after many years of marriage carry deep attachments to their deceased spouses. This paper explores some aspects of the persistence of the marital tie after the first few years of separation and mourning have passed. We argue that the tie persists through and beyond most of grieving, and that it potentially is a significant and permanent theme in the widow(er)s life.

At the outset we should explicate the conceptual bias of the authors: we see all strong family bonds as persisting over a lifetime, whether they be early parent-child ties, or marriage ties broken by divorce or death. Elsewhere we have argued that although viable relationships with surrogates may develop, the initial tie persists (Moss & Moss, 1975; Moss & Moss, 1980a; Moss & Moss, 1980b). Here we suggest that the widow(er), who generally does not remarry, has a particularly potent tie with the deceased spouse formed out of the many years of being together.

The sources of data for this conceptual paper, are a number of ethnographic case histories currently being obtained at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center and naturalistic observation and informal interviews with elderly widow(er)s personally known to the authors.

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[1]Presented at the 34th Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Toronto, November 1981.

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Excluded from the discussion, but of considerable importance are such central issues as gender of the surviving spouse, quality of the marital relationship, circumstances of the death, personality, life style and social supports of the widower, and class and ethno racial factors. The paper focuses on non-pathological aspects of the attachment, and thus intentially skirts the clinical literature of unresolved pathological attachment to the deceased (Ramsey, 1981).

In marriages which had been heavily laden with dissatisfaction and frustration, the bond after death may well be weakened, and produce little sustaining comfort or satisfaction to the widow(er). For most widow(er)s, we suggest, however, there tends to be a theme of acceptance and forgiveness, combined with affirmation and idealization of the marriage. Thus, this paper emphasizes the positive aspects of the tie.

The major element in the tie between the widow(er) and the deceased spouse is pervasive and persistent memory. The tie to the deceased is evoked and nourished by memory.

Many memories however, may be distorted, and the widow(er) may think of the other not as he or she actually was but as the survivor would have wished.

Certainly, memory of the dead is selective (Waller, 1951). It is episodic and may come in flashes, often combined with a rush of feeling. Waller suggests that by adding together and re-working these recollections we maintain a consistent image of the spouse and of his/her life.

Thus, memory revitalizes the past in the present.

Grief tends to persist in significant ways, well beyond the initial year or two of bereavement.

For the widow(er) who begins to come to terms with the loss, often after a period of several years, there may be a persistent theme of denial. In spite of the recognition that the spouse is long dead there may be a feeling that the deceased is physically or symbolically present.

Anger, too, may persist: anger at fate which removed the loved one, at the medical staff for its failures, or at the deceased person for failing to take proper precautions or care of him or herself. The protest may represent an attempt to regain proximity with the primary person.

Threads of despair, too, persist. Gorer (1967) found many widow(er)s, though they were functioning quite adequately many years after the spouse's death, still felt deeply sad about the loss.

Closely tied to a sense of presence is the quest for symbolic reunion.

The continuing yearning and searching may be a normal long term wish to regain contact with the lost person.

In recent centuries of western history, particularly since the romantic age of death in the 18th century (Aries, 1981), people have wanted to be buried next to their spouse. One author's 80 year old grandmother's wish was to have her ashes mingle with those of her husband who had died 30 years earlier, and then the ashes were to be scattered by the children over the family homestead. A 79 year old woman, widowed for 8 years and now in failing health recently said, "Now I'd like to lie down next to Joe"

The widow(er)'s tie with the deceased is bolstered by the social and cultural milieu.

Society values the marital bond, tends to perpetuate it, and does not allow the death of a spouse to terminate it. Wives and husbands are expected to continue to keep the memory alive and to fulfill expectations of their deceased spouses. It is common for family and friends to continue to see the survivor linked to the spouse.

A long term marriage, often covering four or more decades--has developed its unique qualities over the years. For most persons long married, the bond has become a primary attachment (Weiss, 1973); that is, one that can bear no substitution. Among the themes that tend to be central to this close, interdependent relationship are caring, intimacy, family, commitment and reciprocal identity support. Each of these will now become the focus of our discussion.

Caring

Caring involes a concern for each other's welfare. It develops out of deep feelings of empathy over the years. To some extent there is a mutual response to the other's needs and a sense of responsibility to insure that the needs are met.

In large part it may be a validation of the mutual caring that was embedded in the relationship, and an affirmation of its genuine quality.

To give up caring even after death would be in a sense giving up the person and all that went into the relationship. This is not only an individual stance, but a socio-cultural expectation that the survivor maintains devotion to the spouse even though he or she reaches out to new relationships.

Some widow(er)s (whether they be religious or not) indicate their continuing concern that the deceased is all right wherever he or she is. How often do we hear, "May she rest in peace." There is a concern not only for the person but for the pursuits and causes that he or she valued and may have left unfinished.

Some may displace on others their care-eliciting behavior. Mrs. R., a widow of 5 years after 50 years of marriage, had become increasingly solicitous of their daughter in the years following his death.

Conversely, widow(er)s may see the deceased as still caring for them, watching out for their welfare, and protecting them.

Intimacy

Intimacy is based upon a shared knowledge of each other gained through a deep sense of companionship.

In a long marriage, with habitual patterns of daily interactions, each partner anticipates the observations and responses of the other. Over the years with an increase in mutual disclosure there may be a shift from privacy between each of the spouses, to a sense of shared privacy which the couple has from the outside world. Each spouse not only sees the world through his/her own eyes, but increasingly through the eyes of the intimate other.

How can this sense of marital intimacy persist after a spouse dies? Perceptions of the world are influenced by those of the deceased. They shared an assumptive world. How they looked at things together as well as the deceased persons's own unique ideas will affect current perceptions.

There may be an implicit dialogue with the intimate other regardless of how long ago the spouse died. Although there may be "welcome memories" (Eliot, 1969) which intensify the pleasure of the present moment, there is often a pain of loss and of not being able to enjoy and react to the familiar habitual responses of the deceased. Mr. P., a ___ year old widower of ___ years, says:

> "We used to walk together and eat lunch...We would go to the avenue. I can't take it now. I tried a few times, but I couldn't take it... I imagined her voice...You know, what she would say to me...I would see other elderly people...couples...they would be laughing and talking... It made me feel even worse...

Family feeling. In a marriage, each spouse becomes part of the other's family system which reinforces the marital bond. Children also provide intergenerational continuity.

After a spouse dies, the family tie persists and the widowed person remains in the web of relationships.

The deceased was imbedded in the family, and had a unique tie with each family member. The family as a whole must shift to maintain its integrity while accomodating to the loss.

Role substitutes simply share the role of the deceased; they do not replace him or her. Thus, a caring daughter cr son becomes a part of the triad of a surrogate relationship (Moss and Moss, 1975).

The death of a family member does not diminish the size of the family; rather memories, legacies and myths surrounding the deceased persist over generations.

Commitment. Commitment involves an intended sense of continuity.

Even after death a bondedness continues, based in large part on loyalty and indebtedness. During many decades of marriage each spouse repeatedly made choices to maintain the marital bond; a continuing commitment to the marriage, even in widowhood, affirms the wisdom of past choices.

The deceased may well have claims on the survivor to meet previously set expectations. If the spouse fulfills the will of the deceased, this may engender satisfaction and closeness to the other,

How long does one stay committed to the deceased? There may be no defined end, perhaps forever, though with diminished intensity.

Reciprocal identity support

In the process of forming a marriage, each spouse becomes the ground for the other, and each is defined and confirmed in part by the other. Though the spouses may be separate and individuated, they are part of the couple relationship. Their common bond adds to their identities.

Ask a widow(er) about him or herself and quickly one knows of the past marriage and the loss of a spouse. Though a spouse dies, identity support to the survivor continues. There is a sense of continuing to be the "other half," and Giving the deceased up is never complete, since so much of what the deceased represented stays within as an internal referee.

Holding on to this image helps to stabilize the identity of the survivor.

Home as the Mechanism in Maintaining the Bond

Next we turn to the final theme which strengthens the tie with the deceased. A rarely examined aspect of the widow(er)'s life is the sense of home (Rowles, 1978; Rubinstein, 1981), a complex mixture of psychological-social-cultural meanings which is very significant for many elderly persons. The home, shared by the couple, may be the place which most strongly ties the widow(er) with the deceased.

The home and the neighborhood carry multiple symbols of past associations and interactions. Places where so many past events occurred may take on some of the meaning of the events themselves.

Home often represents family--the persons who historically occupied its space--and particularly the deceased spouse. It may symbolize the feelings of love and caring that pervaded the family relationships, and may offer the survivor some of the supports which were characteristic of the deceased spouse. Cherished gifts and possessions are not only a reminder of the loss but a positive affirmation of what had been. They may be painful reminders of the loss (several widowers reported finding it too painful to use the bed and bedroom they shared with their wife). Others may find possessions a comfort and security, along with providing a sense of continuity.

Many elderly widow(er)s do remain in their home. One 99 year old widower, still living alone 9 years after his wife's death, was so wedded to his home of over five decades, that he was reluctant to spend a week visiting a daughter because he wanted to be very sure that he would die in this house.

This may exemplify the strong sense of identity which is enhanced by the home.

Leaving the home may reduce the sense of self, as well as dilute the tie with the deceased spouse.

One has a sense of control over a home. It offers an arena in which one can recall a cherished past. To the outside world, the spouse may be relegated to the past, but within the home there are the special cues which allow the past to mingle with the present, and to support the persistent tie.

Thus many of the themes of the marriage:

are also found in the home. It is not surprising then, that a sense of home may be quite inextricably woven in the pervasive tie with the deceased spouse.

Implications

Throughout this paper we have emphasized the positive and supportive nature of the widow(er)'s tie with the deceased. We have stressed that the tie is never broken, but in fact continues as welcome memories and associations in daily life. A continuity of symbolic interaction is expressed in the persistence of basic components of marriage: caring, intimacy, family feeling, commitment, and identity support.

We have stressed the normality of the persistence of the tie, and see it as generally a nourishing link to the past. It can be ego enhancing and rather than interfering with the widow(er)'s ability to establish new relationships, the tie can become a part of the widow(er)'s new assumptive world.

It is not helpful to look at the tie in all-or-nothing terms. Cutoffs from earlier ties can be very problematic (Bowen, 1978). Professionals might best focus on integrating whatever was good in the marriage and help the widow(er) to accept and forgive the failings and unresolved issues with the deceased. Rather than helping to sever the tie, it should be explored so that it can enhance current wellbeing.

Clinical evidence of the validity of this conceptual approach may be found in the therapeutic value of life review for the elderly (Butler, 1972; Hausman, 1980), as they identify sources of warmth and security in the past which can bolster identity support and affirmation in the present.

The widow(er) should be viewed in a family context. Family and others in the support network can encourage and facilitate the tie with the deceased.

Mutual sharing about the deceased may form a new treasured bond among the survivors. Although grief dormant for years may be reevoked with an unexpected intensity, it tends to be transient and quite manageable to the survivor and the family. With a supportive network of family and friends, few seek or need professional help (Lesher, 1981, Pincus, 1974). We have suggested that widow(er)s are strengthened by the persistent themes in the marital tie which are emotional resources in their daily lives.

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